

BEHIND PRISON WALLS

By Julian Hawthorne

SOME PRISON FRIENDS OF MINE



The Prisoners' Christmas Dinner ~

VALE noises are at all times audible in jail, stirrings, footfalls, a subdued voice now and then, the sharp orders of an official—"bawling out" as they are termed; the clanging of steel gates, the murmur of machinery, the cacophony of musical instruments during practice hours in the chapel; as well as the periodical screeches and ringings of whistles and gongs.

The general impression on ear and eye alike is of stealthy repression, a checked unrest—a multifarious creature, uneasy but kept down. The place is perhaps hardly less silent than a cloister, but the peace of the cloister is utterly absent. An atmosphere of animosity and contention prevails all—a constant apprehension of sinister things likely to happen, a breathless struggle, the sullenness of hate, the whispering of treachery. The eyes of officials peer, watch and threaten; those of the convicts are downcast but privily rebellious, or deprecatingly servile.

It is the everlasting pregnancy of war between slave and master, quite different from submission to rightful authority. Whatever the law may say, the rightfulness of prison authority is never admitted by prisoners. Honest authority is tranquil and secure; prison authority goes armed, conscious of its unrighteousness, and there is unremitting nervous stress on both sides. Both sides seem secretly to await a signal to sudden conflict.

At dinner, soon after my arrival, amid the omnipresent murmurous palaver of conversation, there fell an unusual noise. The unusual is always formidable in jail. The noise was nothing in itself and would have passed unheeded in a hotel dining room. But over us, crowded together there, spread an instant hush.

All knew that men had been stabbed, frenzied affrays had broken out in that room. What was it now? The guard in the window stiffened and poised his rifle. The guards on the floor caught their breath, but assumed a confident air. The men sat staring in the direction of the noise, tense and waiting.

Nothing happened. Somebody had dropped a plate and broken it, perhaps. But had some natural leader of the enslaved leaped up and shouted at that juncture murder would have followed the next moment. Among every hundred convicts there are eight or ten whom misery and wrong have made reckless, whose morbid rebelliousness needs to break forth only the shadow of opportunity to kill before being killed, and they accept it. But it was not to be that day, and we relaxed and grinned nervously or grimly and resumed our meal.

Eight hundred men, clad in a shapeless monotony of dingy blue, labelled on the back with their disgrace, stepping lightly or shuffling hastily to and fro, heads bent and eyes downcast, performing various offices, menial, clerical or industrial, with a certain obsequiousness and ostensible zeal that was yet inwardly repulsion and protest—these were men born under the great flag, Americans, my countrymen, and now my companions! What a change, what a degradation from the free American citizen of the streets and boundless expanses! Not men, now, but slaves, condemned to penal servitude; not citizens, but a



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Before He Was Sent to Prison.

In the Atlanta Penitentiary

class apart and alien; felons, criminals, no longer entitled to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness, but existing in shame and on sufferance, ruined, nameless, parted from friends and families, with present physical pain and mental misery, and with a future of hounding and helplessness, of fear and hiding, of uselessness and aimlessness, of insanity and base death!

Upon what plea are these conditions established? Because the slaves had broken the law—been guilty of crimes. But what crimes? Some had done murder, others committed rape, some had held up a train, another had blown a safe, another was a pickpocket, another a white slaver, this one had stolen food to avert starvation, that was a confidence or bank embezzler, here was one snared in some technicality of new finance laws, yonder an ignorant moonshiner from the hills, who had grown corn in his back yard and thought he had a right to make whiskey out of it—he had no other means of livelihood.

Breakers of God's laws; of man's; victims of tricks and legal technicalities, or torturing want, and of headlong passion, and of sheer court errors or of perjured testimony—here they were, all on the same footing, no discriminations made! To what end? So that they might be punished and repent and go forth better men and useful workers, and so that society might be protected and its integrity vindicated.

It sounds like a jest; but the men are here, the thing is done. In some moods I would say to myself, "It's too preposterous—it can't be—it's an hallucination—a bad dream!" But there it was, visible and palpable.

Was it protection for society to shut up a man from ability to support those dependent on him, who were thus themselves driven to want and perhaps crime, multiplying the original criminality by three or four or half a dozen? Could any injury which the culprit could do to the community equal the injury thus done by the community to him and his, and indirectly to itself, by such treatment? Or could the technical and perhaps unconscious violator of an obscure and whimsical law be reformed by putting him on an equality with a cold blooded murderer, or with a man who had grown rich by selling the shame of women? Was the punishment equitable which handled with equal severity a brutish negro from the cotton fields and a man brought up in refinement and gentleness?

But I would go further and challenge the right of the community to inflict penal imprisonment as we know it at all. Some criminals belong in hospitals, others in insane asylums; for others the thoughtless neglect and selfishness of society is responsible, and they should be succored, not punished; and the remainder should be constrained, under surveillance but not in confinement, to compensate the harm they did by labor or self-denial aimed directly at that result. But of this hereafter.

Meanwhile, I paid attention to my companions themselves. In their intercourse with one another there was a singular amenity or pleas-



Atlanta Prison Inmates Assembled in the Prison Yard to Witness a Game of Baseball Between Two Convict Teams.